

Fort Manoel restoration – a jewel waiting to shine

by Michael Carabott

If one had taken a walk around Manoel Island just a few years ago, it would be a walk through rubbish and crumbling yellowing walls while dodging barking and dangerous fighting dogs.

Fast forward a few years, and a few million euros later, and the contrast could not be starker. Fort Manoel is a hive of activity, with workers going at it hammer and tongs to restore the monument to its former glory. No stone has been left unturned – literally, with marble slabs being set into the gaps where pieces have been pilfered, gun stores being scrubbed down and their original stonework coming to life. It is as if a veil of filth has been lifted to reveal the lost treasures beneath.

Fort Manoel was constructed in the first half of the 18th century by order of Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena.

A total of e30 million is being spent by MIDI in a programme that covers the restoration of Fort Manoel and Fort Tigné. It also includes the remains of the 19th-century plague hospital, the maritime quarantine station or lazaretto, and the cattle quarantine shed, which is the oldest building on Manoel Island.

The professional restoration team is led by architects Alex Torpiano and Svetlana Sammut of the aoM Partnership, which is a liaison between the architectural practices TBA Periti and Architecture Project.

Work is well ahead at Fort Manoel with the gunpowder stores now back to a pristine state. The casemate, the fortified vaulted chamber from where guns were fired, has been restored to its original state. The barracks, which had lost their ceilings, were leaning outwards and succumbing to stone erosion, are being carefully reinforced and strengthened.

One of the greatest challenges was the Chapel of St Anthony of Padua, which took a direct hit during World War II. It was later plundered for its intricate stonework and statues. “We had very little to go on – there was very little left – and after much debate we decided that, instead of building something entirely different, we would reconstruct

the chapel, in order to maintain the integrity of the original fort,” Professor Torpiano said. “I don’t usually approve of reconstruction, but in this case we thought it necessary.”

Fort Manoel faces Valletta’s St Michael’s Bastion across the creek and was built to defend that exposed flank of the capital city, serving roughly the same purpose as Fort St Angelo on Valletta’s other side.

Officers and men of the Order of St John were stationed at Fort Manoel until 1798, when Napoleon Bonaparte’s troops arrived. The fort continued to serve as a military base under the British from the beginning of the 19th century right up until just after WWII, taking several direct hits from enemy bombs.

Grand Master Lascaris acquired Manoel Island, then known as L’Isola del Vescovo, from the Bishop of Malta and the Cathedral Chapter in 1643. The Order of St John was well aware of the danger posed to Valletta by this unguarded islet just across the water. Work on the fort began 80 years later – but the maritime quarantine station was moved from beneath St Barbara’s Bastion in Valletta to the islet, once it was acquired.

A quarantine shed was built for cattle imported from the Barbary Coast and a lazaretto was constructed in stages. The lazaretto is often mistakenly confused with the plague or isolation hospital elsewhere on the island, but the two served entirely different purposes.

The lazaretto was used for healthy passengers disembarking in Malta, who had to be kept in quarantine for 40 days – hence “quarantine” – to ensure that they were carrying no disease. One of them was Lord Byron. Once the restoration of the fort is completed, the aoM Partnership team will turn their attention to the lazaretto, which is in a highly weakened state, having been subjected to the ravages of sea air, wave erosion, vandalism and general environmental deterioration.

The MIDI plc project was given a unanimous vote of approval by Parliament in 2000, after several years of negotiations.
